

Visionary experience in early christianity: spontaneous or culturally oriented?*

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Abstract

This article treats the apparent contradiction between the spontaneity of religious experience in ancient Judaism and in early Christianity (negated in much of the scholarship) and the fact that it manifests itself according to guidelines predetermined by the tradition. The hypothesis that is defended here is that visionary experience or experience in trance (such as glossolalia) can only be legitimate when it makes reference to the forms of expression of the group to which it belongs.

Keywords: Religious experience, visions, ecstasy, New Testament

Experiência visionária no cristianismo primitivo: espontânea ou orientada culturalmente?

Resumo

Este artigo aborda a aparente contradição entre a espontaneidade da experiência religiosa no judaísmo antigo e no cristianismo primitivo (negada em boa parte da pesquisa) e o fato dela se manifestar segundo padrões pré-determinados pela tradição. A hipótese aqui defendida é que só pode ser legítima a experiência visionária ou de transe (como a glossolalia, por exemplo) quando ela faz referência às formas de expressão do grupo a que pertence.

Palavras-chave: experiência religiosa, visões, êxtase, Novo Testamento

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Experiencia visionaria en el cristianismo primitivo: ¿espontánea o culturalmente orientada?

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la contradicción existente entre la espontaneidad de la experiencia religiosa en el judaísmo antiguo y en el cristianismo primitivo (negada en buena parte de la investigación) y el hecho de ella manifestarse según los patrones predeterminados por la tradición. La hipótesis aquí definida sostiene que sólo puede ser legítima una experiencia visionaria o de transe (como la glosolalia, p. ej.) cuando ella hace referencia a las formas de expresión del grupo al cual pertenece.

Palabras clave: Experiencia religiosa, visiones, éxtasis, Nuevo Testamento

1. Visionary experience in Early Christianity: beyond literary forms and fake accounts

The theme of religious experience in Early Christianity has not been dealt sufficiently in academic research, if not ignored entirely. Theological presuppositions and rationalist understandings of religion have prevented its proper consideration. It is not just a case of theological interference in academic research, due to the willingness to read biblical texts as bases for theological dogma, but of a monopoly on the part of certain literary approaches, such as Form Criticism. Early Christian texts represent fragments of memory about how First Century Christians expressed their beliefs and how they organized themselves as communities in society. But the biblical fragments we possess do not comprehend all aspects of their writers' and readers' life and cannot be taken as a true reproduction of their world. We can say from the start that production of literature was a secondary activity. The way we read the New Testament (in itself a selection of fragments) is exclusively oriented to recognize literary conventions. First Century Christians are portrayed as writers of texts and potential theologians, preparing the way for the dogmatic constructions of the Ancient Church. According to this perspective the text is analyzed as a conventional text, as an arrangement of literary forms. It is not surprising that we are unable to perceive religious experience behind the intense scribal activity of the first followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

In contrast to New Testament research it is worth mentioning that in my study of Ancient the theme of visionary religious experience has received special attention in the last decade, including studies of the Dead Sea Scrolls in texts like the *Hodayot* and the *Shirot*. But the Jewish mystic texts of the *Hekhalot Mysticism* as recently interpreted, for example, by James Davila,¹

¹ Davila, J. R. *Descenders to the Chariot: The People behind the Hekhalot Literature*. Leiden: Brill, 2001.

occupy the center of the scholars' attention. Davila aims at understanding the religious experience of the "descenders to the Chariot" in analogy to Shamanic States of Consciousness (SSCs) and its initiatory and preparatory ascetic techniques, experiences of disintegration and reintegration, control of the spirits, as well as the otherworldly journey itself. In his work Davila analyzes the phenomenon with its magic and mystic implications and suggests that behind the texts lies authentic religious experience in Jewish communities of the Tannaitic period. In our opinion some of the conclusions of Davila's work can be extended to more ancient texts such as the *merkavah* accounts in apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple period.

Research on the Historical Jesus moves in the opposite direction.² Jesus has been reconstructed in a demythologized and nonreligious form, as a kind of cynic philosopher-prophet announcing a new society with justice for the poor where gentiles and the excluded would have a place.³ This secularized Jesus is not allowed to have had experiences of mystical quality as well as any visionary experience. The origin of such experiences is to be found in the imagination of Jesus' followers as the reaction of frustrated Christians within society. In order to explain why the new Jesus society (the Kingdom of God) had not so far become a reality, led them to transfer it to the future and transform Jesus in a mythic character.

The present research on Paul give us a more promising outlook. Works such as Segal's⁴ and Ashton's⁵ – although seem to represent a minor trend in contemporary research – show that it is possible to understand the influence, message and missionary activity of Paul on the basis of his foundational experience of seeing the resurrected Jesus on the Damascus Road. Paul gives us also one of the most impressive first person accounts of the soul's ascent to the heavens in order to receive revelation (2 Cor 12). He gives a confused statement in which he is not sure of having ascended with or without the body and of receiving an ineffable revelation. Paul's contradictory sensations with their uncertain basic limits ("in the body" or "out the body") and the absence of very sophisticated apocalyptic *topoi* and language leads us to the conclusion that he depicts an actual experience.

The book of Revelation of John is the earliest Christian book which gives us other first person accounts of revelations received through visionary

² In spite of some interesting and isolated efforts in considering mystic elements in the Jesus tradition, such as the article of Quarles, Ch. L. "Jesus as Merkavah Mystic," *JSHJ* 3.1 (2005), p. 5-22.

³ Crossan, J. D. *O Jesus Histórico: A vida de um camponês judeu do Mediterrâneo*. Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1994.

⁴ Segal, A. F. *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

⁵ Ashton, John. *The Religion of Paul the Apostle*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

experience. It begins with a vision of Jesus as the Son of Man (cap. 1), a heavenly being, and the book is throughout structured around a heavenly journey of the prophet John. According to chap. 4,1-2:

After this I saw, and behold, a door was opened in heaven, and the first voice which I heard like a trumpet spoke to me. 'Come up here, and I will reveal to you what must happen after this'. Immediately I was in a prophetic trance (*egenon, n en pneumatē*), and behold a throne was situated in heaven and someone seated upon the throne.⁶

David Aune, whose translation we quoted above, rendered *egenomhn en pneumatē* as "I was in a prophetic trance." The reference to the "open door," the angelic call to John offering him revelation and the fact that after the ascending he beholds the throne of God, suggest that John is indeed experiencing a transport of the soul to the heavenly realm through a prophetic trance. But that conclusion is not widely accepted because the account of John, in this chapter and in the rest of the book, is literarily too elaborated. John – in contrast to Paul – writes an authentic apocalypse with all the correspondent worldview, literary forms, and *topoi*. What should be an advantage in favor of the authenticity of John's experience is regarded as an obstacle for understanding it in those terms. We face here a problem: the more sophisticated the language that expresses a religious experience, the less authentic it sounds. The experience of Paul reported in 2 Corinthians 12, because of its naiveté, contradictions, and uncertainties in the description, ought to be considered true religious experience. But the visionary ascent of John, in spite of all the terms that point to an experience of ecstasy, should be regarded as fake. Is this true in the history of religion? Is it also true in the case of Early Christianity?

Academic research has inquired about the influences of the Old Testament on the Book of Revelation. Literary themes and forms, expressions and images seem to derive from Old Testament prophets such as Ezekiel and Daniel. John "writes" the language of the prophets. The intended use of those texts can lead us to the one-sided conclusion that John, the seer, developed only an intense scribal activity. Does this necessarily exclude actual visionary (ecstatic) experience? The central issue seems to be that John is not creating new images, stages, and characters. He is not creating *ex nihilo*, but arranging existing pieces on the board, changing their positions and maybe also changing their functions. He was playing the game within its possible variations. He was contemplating in heaven the same things already described

⁶ Translation according to Aune, D. *Revelation 1-5* (World Biblical Commentary 52a). Dallas: Word Books, 1997, p. 268.

in the visions of Ezekiel, Isaiah, Daniel, and 1 Enoch 14. Let us ask a question from an inverted perspective: in order to express an authentic experience would a religious functionary express it outside the language of his group? Would it be necessary to break with his religious tradition? How would he be understood by his group if his experience had no echo in the common language of the group? Would that kind of consideration make justice to the phenomenological but also sociological dimensions of religious experience? Those questions could be extended to other literary accounts of visions in the Pseudepigraphic and Qumran literature.

2. Experience and tradition: can religious experience be learned?

Let us examine this question from a trans-cultural perspective. Ecstatic experience plays a central role in the structure of Afro-Brazilian religions such as the Brazilian Candomblé (and the Cuban Santería). It is in trance that the oracular communication between the *orixás* and the community takes place. It is also in the form of trance that the *orixás* possess (mount) their sons and daughters (horses), and is through their bodies that they manifest themselves in the community's ritual feasts. After the invocation of the *orixás* many of their sons dance, guided by the rhythm of drums (*atabaques*) which are played in their honor. The dance is ritually ordained. The initiates repeat typical gestures of the *orixás* learned from the myths at initiation: when representing *Ogum*, the movements are violent and evoke battles; when dancing in honor of *Oxum*, the gestures are sensual and feminine, etc. The initiates hold images of the instruments, adornments, and weapons of the corresponding *orixás* during the ritual dances and many of these initiates are possessed by them in ecstasy. But in spite of being taken by a kind of Altered State of Consciousness they do not change the structure of the performance and are still representing the pattern of the dances expected by sons and daughters of *Ogum* or *Oxum*. During the second part of the ritual dance that happens under trance (possessed by their *orixás*) they are taken apart and dressed with the traditional garments of the god while still performing trance dances according to traditional gestures. They can vary and improvise to a certain extent, but they will still be recognized as possessed by them.

There is also a kind of thoroughly spontaneous trance observed in the Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban *orixás* ceremonies: the possession of the *santo bruto* (brute possession). This is the first indication for a visitor of the house that he/she is been invited by the *orixá* for the initiation. It is a brutal and violent trance. Normally the affected person falls on the ground and twitch his body strongly. It is a kind of trance not shaped or patterned by culture, whose gestures are not traditional or learned. The person under that kind of

trance run through a long and detailed process of initiation. In this process he/she will learn the myths and secrets concerning the house and the *orixás*, and will be treated as a new born baby, receiving a new name, respecting hierarchies, eating ritual meals, learning songs, offering sacrifices, and having his head purified and prepared for the god. It is curious for our purpose to observe that the spontaneous and violent trance (especially because of being considered true) is not prompted by the priests. The kind of trance valued is the one learned in the community which corresponds to the expected gestures and typical actions of the gods, and above all, of the *orixá* that possesses his/her head. Nevertheless, according to the evaluation of ethnologists like Roger Bastide there is no reason to disqualify them as fake.

Before we ask about possible implications for the research of visionary trance in Early Christianity let us stress two points. Firstly, that the religious trance considered from this point of view has less to do with psychopathological dysfunctions than with social learned processes. Sociologically speaking, we can affirm with Bastide that: "the mystical crisis does not happen at random, creating its own ritual, as happens with illness. It belongs to a cultural context, following a number of collective patterns". Secondly, that - still quoting Bastide - the structure of ecstasy is the same as the structure of myth. The way people are possessed by their gods and the way they express that condition is determined by the myths and the actions ascribed to their gods. "The trance is regulated by mythical patterns".⁷

3. Questions for the study of ecstasy and visionary experiences in Early Christianity

When we refer to trance experiences and their cultural embodiment in Brazilian Candomblé and Cuban Santería we are in no way saying that they have the same structure of religious experiences in Ancient Judaism and First Century Christianity. We wanted demonstrate through analogy with a modern trance centered religion that trance is not individual and absolutely spontaneous. It is somehow learned and follows ritual patterns. So far, the trans-cultural parallel with Brazilian Candomblé.

In similar way, Segal affirms about the Jewish Hekhalot mysticism:

...religious experiences are strongly influenced by the cultural context in which they occur, that the group itself through its leaders decides what is a valid or invalid experience and adepts learn which experiences to validate or valorize. It is not too much to suggest that in process they learn how to generate the correct kind of physical states and extinguish those that are considered

⁷ Bastide, R. *O Candomblé da Bahia*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2001, p.189.

unhelpful. This means of course that mysticism is not a solitary experience; it is an experience that is social. It also means that it is not ineffable necessarily, the elements of mysticism can be learned and conditioned.⁸

In my opinion, it is valid also for Early Christian visionary texts that – so Jewish they are – enable prophets and seers in ecstasy to rearrange images and scenes according to the limits imposed by their tradition. The comparison applies too for the ritual context of trance. New Testament seers, like John, do not have their experiences for themselves and may be they do not have them alone. We have many liturgical references in the book of Revelation suggesting that John's experience started there.

Which pattern could John have learned and ritually imitated in his true experience of visionary trance? He possibly followed the narrative of ancient prophets and primordial characters that ascended to heaven under danger and angelic threat in order to contemplate the throne-merkavah of God described in anthropomorphic way. There he faces the power that gives origin to the creation and conducts history to the *eschaton*. This Second Temple apocalyptic narrative includes also the conception of the transformation of human impurity in angelic beings in order to ascend to the heavenly realm. But in doing so it also allowed man to take part in the angelic worship before the throne. Worship assures and guarantees the trance. It expresses the community religious experience. Here we meet a conjunction of mythical narrative and communal experience. John follows the paths and transformations of former visionaries in order to ascent to the throne and once there he takes part in a worship that is the ideal counterpart of the worship of his community. It means that the structure of the account is circular. He ascends in order to face the heavenly powers already invoked in his own ritual context. Far from preventing religious experience we have to recognize that only this narrative frame is able to express his experience.

It is also true that we cannot consider all visionary scenes of Revelation as originated from actual trance experience. The book carries complex literary structures presupposing an elaborated work of redaction and authorship. In order to consider properly its literary work we could adopt the useful distinction suggested by Davila in his treatment of the Hekhalot material. He distinguishes macro and micro forms. Some bigger compositions presuppose more redaction work, but there are micro forms that can be considered nuclei of visionary experience.

The account of John's ascent to the heavens is crystallized by tradition. The model of Jewish journeys to the throne of God appears since the first apocalyptic ascent in 1 Enoch 14:

⁸ A Construção do "Eu" transcendente em Terceiro Enoque, *Oracula* 2.4 (2006), p.11-12.

- a) “the open heaven” or “an open door in heaven”
- b) the act of seeing and the account of a vision/dream
- c) description of a throne scene and worship
- d) vision of the throne (and of an anthropomorphic image of God)
- e) references to trance
- f) angelic mediation and angelic hierarchies

Ascents to the heaven such as found in the Ladder of Jacob, Apocalypse of Abraham, Ascension of Isaiah, 2 Enoch, Apocalypse of Zephaniah, and Revelation of John, among others – all belonging from the First Century B.C to the Second Century A.D. – offer a diverse and creative literature structured within this narrative and mythic frame. But we never have in this literature a mechanic imitation of it. In these works we find also discrete indications of true trance through which the seers show that they were reaching the limits of language, expressing contradictory sensations⁹, angels using unknown languages in their worship, sensations of fear and awe, expressing their visions through numinous language¹⁰ or explicit descriptions of trance¹¹. It is remarkable how prayer and praise are important in those texts: the more the visionary does it, safer is his ascent and more revelation he receives. In this field we find important variations (like in the way the *qeddushá* is sung).

⁹ 1 En 14 is the first account of an ascent to the heavens in the apocalyptic literature. He describes the celestial house as “which was built of hailstones, and its floor (was) snow. Its roof (was) like the path of the stars and flashes of lighting, and among them (were) fiery Cherubim, and their heaven (was like) water. And (there was) a fire burning its wall ... And I went into that house, and (it was) hot as fire and cold as snow, and there was neither pleasure nor life in it. Fear covered me and trembling took hold of me, I fell on my face” (Knibb, M. A. *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, p.98). Contradictory sensations we find also in the Book of Revelation 10, 9-10, when John receives a little open scroll from a powerful angel, that says: “Take it and eat it; it will turn your stomach sour (pikranei/ sou thn koi lian), but it will taste as sweet as honey (al l en tw/ stomati, sou estai glukú. wj mel i)” ¹⁰ So I took it out of the angel’s hand, and I ate it and it tasted sweet as honey, but when I had eaten it my stomach turned sour.”

¹⁰ That is the case of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice of the Dead Sea Scrolls. See: The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition, vl.2 4Q274-11Q31, translated by F. Garcia Martinez and E.J.C. Tisgchelaar. Brill: Leiden, 1998, p.805-837. See also Newson, C. *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition* (Harvard Semitic Studies). Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985 and Qumran Cave 4, VI, Poetical and Liturgical Texts, Part 1. Discoveries in the Judean Desert, XI, E. Eshel, H. Eshel, C. Newson, B. Nitzan, E. Schuller and A. Yardeni (eds.), Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1998, p. 173-401.

¹¹ The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah gives us one of the more detailed accounts of a trance in Early Christianity: “And when they all heard the voice of the Holy Spirit, they all worshiped on their knees, and they praised the God of righteousness, the Most High, the

Conclusion

We have tried to show in this paper that tradition provides First Century Jewish and Christian apocalyptic prophets the frame within which they developed their own experiences in relationship with their communities. There is not a priori inadequacy between the apocalyptic literary and structural frames present in tradition and the reality of the religious experience of the ascent to heavens. These experiences don't need to be spontaneous and absolutely innovatory in order to be true. But since the experiences we are dealing with belong to the Ancient world and all witnesses we have about it are literary all the conclusions we reach remain speculative and hypothetical.

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one who (dwells) in the upper world and who sits on high, the Holy One, the One who rests among the holy ones, and they ascribed glory to the One who had thus graciously given a door in an alien world, had graciously given it to a man. And while he was speaking with the Holy Spirit in the hearing of them all, *he became silent, and his mind in his body was taken out from him*. But his breath was (still) in him, for he was seeing a vision. And the angel who was sent to show him (the vision) was *not of this firmament*, nor was he from the angels of glory of this world, but he came from the seventh heaven. And the people who were standing by, apart from the circle of prophets, did [not] think that the holy Isaiah has been taken up. And the vision which he saw was *not from this world* but from the world which is hidden from the flesh" (6,8-16, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vl.2, J. H. Charlesworth (ed.). London/New York: Doubleday, 1985, p.165).